

OPENING STATEMENT
CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR FIREFIGHTERS AND FIRST RESPONDERS:
A VIEW FROM UPSTATE NEW YORK
JUNE 21, 2004

The Committee will come to order. I want to welcome everyone here to beautiful downtown Auburn, New York for this House Science Committee field hearing on federal support for firefighters and first responders. I greatly appreciate my colleague, Congressman Brad Miller from North Carolina, for joining me here and I want especially to offer my thanks to all the witnesses who have taken time from their busy schedules to join us today.

Today's hearing will follow exactly the same rules and procedures that we follow when the Committee convenes in Washington, DC. It is a wonderful chance for citizens to see first hand the workings of their government. It also provides an excellent opportunity for local officials who may not have the time or opportunity to come to Washington to have their views heard.

Today's hearing will focus on an issue that is critical to all of us: ensuring that firefighters and first responders have the resources they need to help protect us from a variety of threats.

There are few matters on which I place a higher priority. That's why I was one of the founding leaders of the Congressional Fire Services Caucus about twenty years ago, and why I'm proud to serve as a Co-chair today.

I've put in all this time because I don't want to make the mistake that so many Americans make, which is taking our first responders for granted. Firefighters, whether paid or volunteer, guard our lives with their lives. They devote themselves to their communities day after day after day - usually outside the limelight. They deserve our help, but when we help firefighters, we're not being altruistic or magnanimous. After all, we're the real beneficiaries. Grants to fire departments make all of us safer.

And the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program that we will review today – commonly referred to as the FIRE Act – has done just that. Fire departments in Central New York and around the country - and the jurisdictions they protect - have benefited greatly from the program over the past three years. In my Congressional District, 56 departments received over \$4 million dollars in grants last year. From Utica to Frankfort to Aurelius to here in Auburn and many of the tiny towns in between, fire departments are getting much needed equipment and training. That is something members of the fire caucus are very proud of.

But many needs are still unmet. The program needs to be continued. And that is why I have introduced with several of my colleagues in Washington the legislation before us today H.R. 4107, which we will consider today.

And let me take a moment to briefly describe the bill, which will allow us to continue to address these most pressing needs. The legislation reauthorizes the fire grant program for three more years, at its current authorized level of \$900 million per year. It mandates the peer-review process that has been such a critical component of the program's success. It calls on USFA to administer the program – the right agency with the track record of success in working with the fire services. It increases the maximum allowable grant size and decreases the matching requirement for larger departments – two issues that were very important to the national fire services organizations with which we worked very closely with to craft this bill, and whom we heard from at a hearing in Washington last month on the bill.

And today I'm excited that we have this opportunity for a follow-up hearing to receive comments from those which the program impacts directly - the end-users.

With that, let me begin to close as we have a limited amount of time and I want to make sure there is plenty left for discussion.

But first, I want to thank all of our witnesses for being here today. And in particular, I would like to thank Chief Mike Quill for his generosity in hosting us here today. I also want to thank Dave Paulison, the U.S. Fire Administrator, for taking time out of his busy schedule to join us here today. For those of you that may not be aware, USFA is a small, but critical agency nestled inside the mammoth Department of Homeland Security. A lot of people in Washington don't know about them, but they have a very important mission: to serve you, the first responder community and the greater public, in reducing the loss of life and property from fires and related hazards.

And I can tell you that Chief Paulison has ably guided the agency in this effort, seeing it through numerous challenges and keeping it focused on its core mission of strengthening the fire services across America while also contributing greatly to the Department's broader efforts to prepare for, and respond to, acts of terrorism.

And as a bit of an aside I should take this opportunity to let Chief Paulison know that he shouldn't plan to rest on these past successes, as Congress will be soon sending him a new challenge in the form of the SAFER Program. I'm pleased to announce that SAFER – legislation of mine that I crafted to complement the FIRE Act by helping us address the critical staffing shortages in our fire services – will hopefully soon be a reality. President Bush signed it into law last year, and just this past week we were able to secure \$50 million in startup funding for the program. It's only a fraction of what is needed, but an important achievement nonetheless, and something we can build on.

With that, I will stop talking, and start listening. First to my colleague Mr. Miller from North Carolina and then to our distinguished panel.